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Southern border is the 'soft underbelly' of U.S., officials say

"I envisage us being duped by a dozen old DC-6s, full of Russian commandos, flying over the Rio Grande. Some border guard looks up and shrugs—'More damn drug runners going up to Arkansas.'"

—John Cusack, chief of staff,
House Select Committee
on Narcotics Abuse and Control

By William H. Inman

VISIBILITY WAS unlimited the morning a snub-nosed jet sidled up to the control tower at Florida's Homestead Air Force Base and its pilot buzzed the controllers.

His message was in Spanish. The men in the tower were momentarily stunned—at a loss to figure out what he was saying, why he was there. Soon they knew.

The pilot, a Cuban defector, wanted to know where to park his armament-laden MiG-17. There on the fuselage, emblazoned as big as the noonday sun, was the white-star emblem of Fidel Castro's air force.

The Cuban had zipped effortlessly through the electronic picket fences guarding this southern flank, registering

scarcely a radar

blip during his long trek

from Cienfuegos, Cuba—located on the southern coast of the island—to the high-powered military base, the nation's eyes and ears over the eastern Caribbean.

The defector's story caused shock waves. First, because it was obvious the nation's air defenses, at least on that day—Oct. 5, 1969—at that salient of the coast, were a joke. Second, because the incident made world headlines.

"Suddenly it appeared we had a soft underbelly," said Bill Deak, spokesman for the Drug Enforcement Agency. "What if it had been a surprise attack, a wave of bombers coming right over the wavetops?"

Last March, Govs. Mark White of Texas and Bob Graham of Florida conjured up that same image, assailing the government's inability to snare intruders along the California-to-Florida frontier. The governors cited evidence of vast gaps in the ground radar network—largely unchanged since that Cuban freedom flight 16 years earlier and penetrated daily by dozens of drug planes, many of them rickety World

War II craft.

"If they [dope peddlers] can fly in and out with impunity," White said, "imagine what a hostile plane, low-flying missile or some mercenary terrorist could do."

UPI examined the evidence, talked to electronic surveillance experts, sifted through congressional testimony and agency studies. Some findings follow:

- Ground radar of the North American Aerospace Defense System [NORAD], built to respond to the threat of the 1950s, cannot detect low-flying aircraft of any kind on the southern approaches: not drug planes, not MiGs, not cruise missiles.

- The so-called DEW line, a distant early warning system now being replaced in Canada, does not exist along the nation's southern perimeter, yet the Pentagon insists it is in a "posture to respond" to any serious military threat in the region.

- Texas has no fixed-radar coverage between Laredo and El Paso, a 500-mile range, and at key points along the western Gulf Coast.

- The Southwest and Gulf of Mexico are at the bottom of the Defense Department's priority list to receive the latest electronic surveillance technology—the Over-The-Horizon Backscatter network.

- The nation's Airborne Early Warning and Control Coverage, its fleet of super-sophisticated planes known as AWACs, does not extend to the so-called "choke points" of Mexico and the Caribbean, ideal vantage points from which to monitor illicit air traffic.

So, who watches over southern U.S. airspace? In some critical places, nobody.

To begin with, continental air defenses are the neglected stepchild of the strategic forces. The south is the neglected of the neglected. The nation's air defense network has only five squadrons of active Air Force fighter-interceptors—18 aircraft each—with another 10 slightly smaller squadrons in the Air National Guard, according to Pentagon data.

Putting that in perspective: American bombers would face 1,250 Soviet interceptor fighters and almost 10,000 antiaircraft missiles to reach their targets; Russian bombers would contend with only 90 Air Force and 180 largely obsolete Air National Guard interceptors.

In addition, the majority of the existing tactical units are positioned away from the gap-riddled southwestern frontier.

There are other inconsistencies. Mexico plays no significant role in the air defense of the northern hemisphere, despite its strategic position. That responsibility is shared entirely by Canada and the United States. All interceptor squadrons are controlled by the joint U.S.-Canadian NORAD command post buried deep in massive caverns in a Colorado mountain. It controls a bewildering array of early-warning radar and optical detectors. There are also special warning satellites, equipped with infrared sensors to detect the hot exhaust of enemy missile launches.

Surveillance goes far into space, but misses hundreds upon hundreds of miles of airspace near the ground.

Conventional land-based electronic surveillance, the heart of the FAA-NORAD system, cannot detect low-flying objects. These fixed radar dishes face skyward; the curvature of the Earth and rocky terrain prevent it from detecting objects close to the ground. The farther from the dish the greater the gap.

"We realize our air defense system is archaic, outmoded and outdated," said Kay Cormier, spokesman for NORAD headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colo. "It was fine 20 years ago when we feared a [high-altitude] bomber threat more than a cruise missile threat."

In Texas, the radar gap is known as Smuggler's Alley, but it's hardly that narrow. At points, according to U.S. Customs data, it stretches for hundreds of miles in width and extends up to three miles [14,500 feet] in altitude.

"You'd have to try real hard to be caught," concedes Jim Adams, director of the Texas Department of Public Safety. In fact, he told Congress, authorities probably catch less than one-tenth of the traffic funneling through the gaps.

Drug traffickers not only evade authorities, most of them are not even detected.

When a balloon-hoisted radar unit was tested over the Bahamas earlier this year, authorities were astounded to discover the magnitude of small aircraft activity they never knew existed.

"The [radar] screen just erupted like it had a bad case of chicken pox," said Bob Mills, staff member of the Senate subcommittee which funds Customs. "They [Customs] were seeing stuff they said they'd never seen before."

To counter acknowledged failings in the defense cordon, the Army and Air Force have lent U.S. Customs helicopters and an array of radar-equipped aircraft to patrol border areas.

The problem is one of coordination. When Customs needs the aircraft, the military is not always prepared to lend them. Drug runners don't bother with timetables. But drug hunters must.

To schedule a piggy-back flight aboard an AWACs-equipped 747 takes an average of four months. Few drug busts have resulted from the hundreds of hours Customs agents have spent aboard AWACs. In addition, many Customs flights are curtailed between midnight and dawn—prime time for smugglers, or for that matter, enemy attack.

Oddly, in an age of cruise missiles and long-range bombers, the Pentagon has been downplaying the threat of a southern attack.

"We feel we're in a posture to respond to any potential [military] threat from the south," said Maj. Peter Wyro, a Defense Department spokesman. "We feel there are isolated instances of what are principally civilian aircraft which don't conform to known military-threat characteristics—waves of aircraft, lift capability, speed, range. But they don't pose any kind of threat to the national defense."

Actually, officials concede, there is a heated debate within the Pentagon on southern vulnerability. The Soviets have been poking around.

"Soviet long-range reconnaissance planes, believed to be originating from Cuban bases, are making an increased number of flights over Mexico's Tuxtla and San Cristobal de las Cases region," near the Guatemalan border, said retired Adm. Elmo Zumwalt, former member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the Air Force Times.

Reports also have surfaced of advanced missile-bearing Soviet submarines cruising in southeastern coastal waters.

Cuban airliners continue to violate—some believe they deliberately test—U.S. flight corridors on the Havana-Mexico route.

In addition, Nicaragua is known to be building an immense air base at Punta Huete near Managua, "the largest and most capable military airfield in Central America." It is a perfect staging area for the Soviet Union's supersonic Backfire bombers, according to a U.S. intelligence report released by the White House.

On March 18, the U.S. and Canada signed a memorandum to modernize the North American defense system. The plan calls for expanding the coverage of AWACs and forward operating fighters and replacing the so-called DEW line. The distant early warning system built three decades ago—31 fixed radar sites stretching in an arc from Greenland across Canada to Alaska—contains "numerous low altitude coverage gaps, exhibits poor radar performance characteristics and is expensive to operate and obtain," according to an Air Force internal review.

The memo also proposes installation of a revolutionary intelligence scanning system known as Over-The-Horizon Backscatter. It would virtually eliminate the threat of low-flying aircraft.

The military hopes to install components of its first Backscatter within three years. It would sweep the East Coast from Greenland to Cuba. A second Backscatter is planned for the West Coast and would be on line sometime after 1987.

The final gap in Backscatter coverage, the southern range from Cuba to California, is perhaps a decade or more into the future. Nobody knows. It's at the bottom of the funding list.

"We need help now along our southern borders, not sometime in the 1990s," said Mills, ranking subcommittee aide to Sen. Dennis DeConcini [D., Ariz.], a critic of the defense surveillance system. "Our sovereign airspace is being violated each day in exactly this region."

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